

# THE **BUSAN** *Hollywood* **REPORTER**

THR.COM/BUSAN

DAILY  
No.1

OCTOBER  
4, 2013

## Busan Rolls Out the Red Carpet

Aaron Kwok and Kang Soo-yeon play host  
as A-listers, auteurs and moviegoers  
descend on Asia's premier film event

# THE *Hollywood* REPORTER

OCTOBER 4, 2013  
THR.COM/BUSAN | BUSAN | No.1

BUSAN  
WEATHER  
AND HIGH  
TEMPS

TODAY  
75° F  
24° C



TOMORROW  
78° F  
26° C



## BIFF Drives South Korean Film Boom

By Clifford Coonan and  
Hyo-won Lee

South Korean films will feature strongly in the market at this year's Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) as exhibitors build on the revival in interest for local movies, but a strong showing from the broader Asia region is also expected.

These are heady days for the Korean film business. So far this year, eight out of the top 10 highest grossing films are Korean, with all eight of them bringing in over 5.5 million admissions.

The Korean film business was valued at over 1.4

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## 108 Media Picks Up Int'l Rights to *Charlie*

By Eitan Vlessing

The worldwide distribution rights to writer/director Emmanuel Shirinian's *It Was You Charlie*, which stars Michael D. Cohen and Aaron Abrams, has gone to Canadian distributor 108 Media Corp. ahead of its world premiere in Busan.

Shirinian's feature film debut is screening at Busan as part of the World Cinema program.

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OPENING FILM



Ranjan, left, stars as a poor sculptor who falls in love with dancer Goswami.

## Vara: A Blessing

Bhutanese priest Khyentse Norbu makes a winning return to the filmmaking fraternity with a sumptuous look at forbidden love set in an Indian village

BY CLARENCE TSUI

*Vara: A Blessing* is transcendence in action. In all senses of the word, that is: it's a tale which sees a young woman reconfiguring her religious zeal into passion for the common man; yet it's also a story about young bodies and minds deploying their innate talents to aspire for something apparently beyond their reach. And — perhaps more importantly — it's a film which sees director Khyentse Norbu making a surprising (and successful) shift into a paradigm far away from his own circumstances and previous aesthetics.

Drastically different in both content and tone from his previous two films — *The Cup*, the 1999 story of young monks trying to tune in to live broadcasts of soccer matches, and *Travellers and*

*Magicians*, the 2003 road movie of sorts about a smalltown Bhutanese official longing for a new life — Norbu's latest film is a slow-burning account of youthful yearnings going into overdrive. Thriving on a rural, class-traversing love triangle that also factors in the three characters' desire to better themselves through art and knowledge, *Vara* is a passionate piece which should go on from its opening-film slot at Busan to outdo the festival success of his previous two features.

Adapting Bengali writer Sunil Gangopadhyay's short story *Rakta Aar Kanna* ("Blood and Tears"), Norbu sets *Vara* in a modern-day Indian village where the odd incursions of modern life — a mobile phone here, a television set playing flashy

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CJ Entertainment's *Miracle in Cell No. 7* took in 12.8 million admissions at the S. Korean box office.

## Korean Film

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

trillion won (\$1.3 billion) in 2012, an increase of 21 percent on the previous year and putting it number seven in the world rankings.

The January release *Miracle in Cell No. 7* became one of the highest grossing locally made films of all time with 12.8 million admissions. The only two Hollywood films among the top rankings this year were *Iron Man 3* and *World War Z*.

**Suh Young-joo**, CEO of influential sales banner

Finecut, is showcasing eight films at the Busan market this year, and all of them are making their market debuts. "BIFF is important because it's a chance for us to introduce new works and to provide a preview for buyers. I hear some buyers are coming to Busan instead of MIPCOM, so that seems to speak for Busan's growing influence in Asia," she says.

**Lorna Tee**, an independent producer working in Asia, believes the market still has to find its footing and to compete with many of the other more established mar-

kets, plus there is a general feeling of market fatigue.

"With the strong showing of Korean films in the local market, it is anticipated that there's a renewed revival for Korean titles from the region and stronger presence of Korean sellers to push their films beyond the home market — this is what spurred the Busan fest in the early years and hopefully will help propel the market too," she says.

The significance of the film sector's success has not been lost on the local government. South Korean President **Park Geun-hye** said the government was committed to boost the film industry which has done so much to promote the country's image abroad. "I think the film industry can make culture thrive and contribute to the creative economy," she told local media during a visit to the festival. "The government will make utmost efforts to help the movie industry to play a leading role in thriving culture and drive growth in the creative economy." **TWR**



Michael D.Cohen stars as a lonely doorman.

## Charlie

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The film's producer, A71 Entertainment, will also release the dark comedy-drama in Canada.

*It Was You Charlie* features Cohen as Abner, a lonely graveyard shift doorman and once-accomplished sculptor coming to terms with an unresolved conflict with his brother and a car accident that claimed the life of a young woman.

The Canadian indie also stars **Henry Alessandro-ni**, **Gillian Bennett** and **Alain Chanoine**.

The distribution deal was hammered out by **Abhi Rastogi**, **Chad Maker**, **David Miller** and **Darren Portelli**. **TWR**

## Filipino Filmmakers Eye Global Market

By Patrick Brzeski

By all accounts, 2013 has been a banner year for Philippine cinema, with more international exposure and domestic industry development than in any year of recent memory.

"We are starting to make real progress," says **Briccio Santos**, chairman of the recently revitalized Film Development Council of the Philippines. "Film production is on the rise, new distribution and exhibition mechanisms are being explored, and audiences are beginning to take hold of their own cinema again."

At this year's Cannes Film Festival, for the first time three Philippine features screened in the Directors'



Fortnight and *Un Certain Regard* sidebars: **Adolfo Alix Jr.**'s prisoner of war piece, *Death March*; **Lav Diaz**'s four-hour meditation on injustice, *Norte, The End of History*, and crime thriller *On the Job*, from **Erik Matti**. No less than seven Filipino titles will screen in Busan this year, including foreign language Oscar hopeful *Transit*.

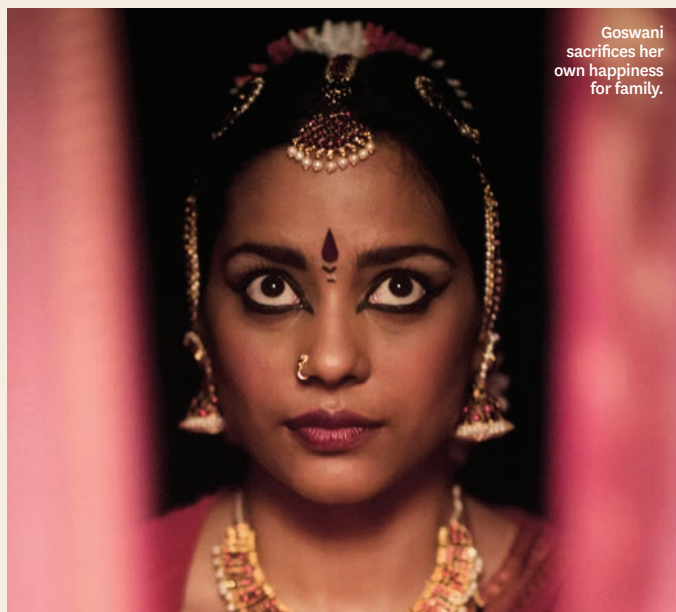
Perhaps more groundbreaking than the premier festival exposure,

Matti's *On the Job* was picked by Well Go USA shortly before Cannes, a development which insiders say has given the film business in Manila an added sense of momentum.

"The interest and sales that came after *On the Job* screening at Cannes have shown that it's possible now for quality genre films from the Philippines to find markets overseas," says veteran film critic and executive director of the Hong Kong International Film Festival **Roger Garcia**.

Matti says producers at home are starting to take notice of the international market as a viable opportunity. "There's a kind of confidence now from some local producers to invest a little more to make well-crafted, complexly written films — because they might have potential overseas — while also telling a strong local story that can appeal to our core audience." **TWR**

# REVIEWS



## *Vara - A Blessing*

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music videos there — remain largely overwhelmed by landscapes which have remained unchanged for a century. At the center of the film is Lila (Shahana Goswani), a young woman who dreams of emulating her mother (choreographer-actress Geeta Chandran) in becoming a skilled dancer, and Shyam (Devesh Ranjan), a lower-caste laborer seeking a

way out of his miserable existence by becoming a sculptor — a profession which could serve as the key to his dreams of a new life in the city.

When *Vara* begins, Lila's love is only for the deity Krishna — a devotion which partly drives her spiritual zeal until it gradually turns into mortal intimacy with Shyam. It's when their tryst yields a physical consequence that Lila's hopes are dashed. With her downward spiral brought to a halt by her secret-admirer Prakash (Pankaj Pawan), a shy, overweight man whose interest in books and telescopes hints at someone with more hopes in life than being Lila and Shyam's parochial landlord.

While Norbu's self-penned English-language screenplay is stilted in places, the director makes up for it with a great visual feast. William Chang — a veteran of stifled-emotional drama through his collaborations with Wong Kar-wai — has helped convey the bristling on-screen passion deftly with assistance from Bradford Young's camerawork and Aradhana Seth's production design.

And then there are the stellar performances of the two leads: Goswani and Ranjan are effective in establishing a frisson which is more substantial and stirring than the sexualized Bollywood music videos shown within the film. In this delicate treatment Norbu has proved his maturity as a filmmaker with power rather than merely prayer.

*Opening Film*

**Cast** *Shahana Goswani, Devesh Ranjan*

**Director** *Khyentse Norbu* // 96 minutes

## Silent Witness

**Chinese A-listers Sun Honglei and Yu Nan team up with Hong Kong star Aaron Kwok for a timely legal drama** BY CLARENCE TSUI

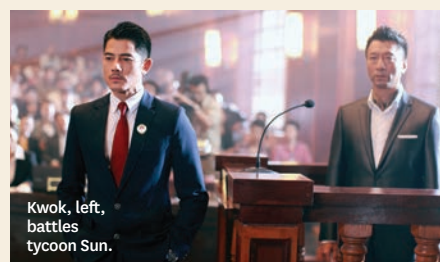
Director Fei Xing's *Silent Witness* mirrors the very high-profile recent trials in China of former Politburo member Bo Xilai (who was handed a life sentence for corruption, among other charges) and Li Tianyi (the son of a top-ranking general and one of five men convicted for gang-raping a young woman). Such proximity to actual events unfolding in the country probably played a part in the film's success at the local box office, where it has made \$27.8 million to date.

The film's title refers to how the trial of Lin Mengmeng (Deng Jiajia) is to take place: The proceedings — which revolve around the university student's trial for murder — are to be broadcast live online and through Weibo, the Chi-

nese equivalent to Twitter. The young woman is charged with murdering the starlet girlfriend of her father (Sun Honglei), a tycoon with a checkered legal record after being hit with multiple charges of fraud over the years.

The film's first quarter offers the proceedings as seen very much from above board, as state prosecutor Tong Tao (Aaron Kwok) cruises to a seemingly easy conviction until defense counsel Zhou Li (Yu Nan) throws the case wide open by managing to provoke Tong's star witness, Lin Tai's longtime subordinate Sun Wei (Zhao Lixin), into admitting he murdered the woman.

It's perhaps ironic that one of the more damning critiques in the film is how cynical lawyers are happy to whip



up public empathy for their clients to help their case, because sensationalism works best for the masses. *Silent Witness* also elects to provide a highly dramatic denouement defined by incredible acts of self-sacrifice. Still, for all its aesthetic merits the film can only offer a tepid commentary on the manifestations of ugly human nature unfolding in real-life Chinese courtrooms today.

*Open Cinema*

**Cast** *Aaron Kwok, Sun Honglei, Yu Nan, Deng Jiajia, Zhao Lixin*

**Director** *Fei Xing*  
120 minutes





## Ilo Ilo

**This subtle snapshot of family life in 1990s Singapore overdoses on understatement**

BY STEPHEN DALTON

Singapore director Anthony Chen paints a bittersweet vignette of family life in *Ilo Ilo*. Striking a fortuitously topical note, the backdrop is the Asian financial crisis of 1997, with unemployment and suicide rates rising. But Chen's interest has a tighter domestic focus, gently probing the unspoken fault lines of class, race and age. The result is a crisp little drama with indie-movie polish, though the slight story and conventional subject matter lack bite.

Koh Jia Ler plays Jiale, a spoiled Singapore schoolboy who runs rings around his exasperated teachers and long-suffering parents, pregnant mother Hwee Leng (Yeo Yann Yann) and her newly unemployed husband Teck (Chen Tian Wen). When a timid new Filipino domestic worker, Teresa — aka "Auntie Terry" (Angeli Bayani) — moves into the family flat, the unruly brat instantly begins defying and bullying her. But beneath her placid surface, Terry proves a smart and resilient addition to the family. Becoming confidante to both father and son, she slowly earns respect and affection from Jiale.

Named after a province of the Philippines, *Ilo Ilo* is a personal project for Chen, who grew up in 1990s Singapore with a Filipino maid and a family suffering financial woes. Finely acted and minutely observed, the film certainly has the texture of real life. The performances feel authentic, the emotional shadings agreeably nuanced. It may be damning Chen's film with faint praise to observe that it also captures the bittersweet banality of middle-class family life with almost numbing accuracy. But faint praise is probably the most honest response to a low-key exercise in domestic navel-gazing that blurs the line between subtle understatement and tasteful tedium.

*A Window on Asian Cinema*

**Cast** Angeli Bayani, Yeo Yann Yann, Koh Jia Ler

**Director** Anthony Chen

## Anthony Chen

The 29-year-old auteur discusses why his Cannes-winner (and Oscar hopeful) *Ilo Ilo* could be a game changer for Singaporean cinema. By Patrick Brzeski

### How autobiographical is *Ilo Ilo*?

I would say that the film is inspired by childhood memories, but not completely autobiographical. I spent most of my childhood in Singapore in the 90s, so that's a period that I understand very well. For my first feature, I wanted to make something that was close to my heart. I didn't know what that would be, but a lot of memories that I had been repressing came into my head at that time. I remembered this Filipino lady who was with us for so long when I was growing up — eight years as our maid. When I was 12, we took her to the airport because she was going back home to the Philippines. I was already 12, but I cried and cried and it was really painful. I thought there was something complex in that relationship that I didn't quite understand, so I went off to write a film about it.

But audiences in Singapore do definitely see it in a different way. Some people are saying that it may be a bit too close to home for them. If you put them in a domestic space it is almost like putting a mirror in front of them.

### How about Filipino audiences?

In Hong Kong and Singapore we had a few screenings for domestic helpers that were sponsored by a local non-profit. It's funny because

they laughed really loud. They saw certain nuances that the Singaporeans and other



audiences never would see and they cried so hard. There have been domestic helper characters in Southeast Asian films before, but they are usually quite derogatory or tokenistic — this is something different.

### In the West, importing a live-in maid from a developing country is a rather bourgeois notion, but in many parts of Asia it's quite commonplace for middle-class families. Have various audiences responded to the film differently?

What has surprised me is that there is a universal quality to the film that I didn't know was there when I was making it. When it premiered at Cannes and screened in Toronto, people said it reminded them of the dynamic of growing up with their au pair. Americans have said it could be made about a Mexican maid or gardener.

### What did the Camera d'Or win at Cannes mean to you?

It did two things. It shined a light on Singaporean cinema and European producers are all of a sudden excited to explore co-productions here. For myself, the film has found favor with a lot of producers in France and the U.K. I want to make my second film in London, because I have been living there for several years. It's opened up a lot of opportunities; funding is the least of my worries now — and usually that's one of the biggest problems for filmmakers in Southeast Asia. **THR**

# 'Til Madness Do Us Part

Wang Bing explores the effects of claustrophobia in this four-hour documentary about life among inmates in a mental institution in China

BY CLARENCE TSUI

Wang Bing's work has always been preoccupied with characters living in "closed" spaces, from decrepit industrial towns of *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* and the middle-of-the-desert petroleum plants of *Crude Oil*, to a forced labor camp in the Gobi in *The Ditch*. His latest offering takes this theme to its extremes with a four-hour documentary set nearly entirely within the heavily guarded confines of a mental institution in the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan.

Length and setting are not the only challenges for the viewer: ceaseless images of visibly disheveled inmates spinning out of control, urinating in their dank and crowded rooms, howling and haranguing

others (and themselves) while scurrying along the cage-like corridors could prove pretty dismaying, but Wang has a way of unpeeling the inherent humanity within such circumstances.

Shot completely on digital cameras, *Madness* does reveal a lot about how marginalized social groups are made to live in China. Here, the protagonists — if they can be called that at all, given how they are stripped nearly completely of their agency — are men kept in an asylum for a wide variety of reasons: some were locked up for felonies of all sorts, while others were committed to the place by their kin with the hope of having their mental problems "cured" (and also their financial burden alleviated).

The film's title points to



Troubled inmates form surprising bonds.

how the men are forced to creating differing forms of intimacy with their fellow detainees. Tragic as these enforced bonds seem, that's where the hope lies, and *Madness* actually allows a glimpse of the human

resilience — however misguided it is — in a cruel Kafkaesque landscape in the grittiest form possible.

*Wide Angle*  
**Director** Wang Bing  
225 minutes

## Judas

A quasi-alternative history that's carried by a compelling central performance BY ELIZABETH KERR

The story of Jesus and Judas is recounted in an adaptation of Leonid Andreev's *Judas Iscariot* in *Judas*, a lushly dusty spin on a familiar tale from a different perspective. There's little in *Judas* that hasn't been theorized or explored before, but director Andrey Bogatyrev (*BaGi*) cleverly draws an alternative theory of Judas' motivations, and elicits an astounding, committed performance from his star.

The concept that Jesus' betrayer was his most devoted follower is expanded on, suggesting that the word of Jesus was misunderstood by his earliest devotees to the degree that Jesus is a peripheral character called simply the Teacher. Focused squarely on

Judas (Aleksey Shevchenkov, in full spitting, rotten-toothed glory) the film begins with Judas casing a market in order to put in a good day of pick-pocketing. He stumbles upon a Nazarene man delivering a sermon in the town square and decides to follow the followers when he gets a look at the fat purse of alms they've collected. Naturally, Judas tries to steal it that night, and when the preacher, the Teacher, forgives him and tells his disciples to let him keep the money, Judas dedicates himself to the cause. We all know



Shevchenkov's unflinching performance locates the humanity in the man who betrayed Jesus.

how the story ends.

*Judas* would only be half as effective as it is if Shevchenkov were not so fully engaged in the character; the calculation behind his eyes is almost tangible. Despite the occasional flight into histrionics, his snarling performance is demanding at the best of times, though it's most affecting in the quieter moments: when he meets with Pilate and strikes a deal for 30 pieces of silver; in the reflective closing scenes. Not surprisingly Dmitry Maltsev's cinematography also contributes an alternately barren and busy sun-baked backdrop that effortlessly highlights Judas' ideological, and occasionally physical, isolation.

*Flash Forward*  
**Cast** Aleksey Shevchenkov,  
Ivan Dobronravov, Sergey Frolov,  
Andrey Barilo  
**Director** Andrey Bogatyrev  
108 minutes



# Snowpiercer

**Bong Joon-ho's first English-language production is a thrilling, allegorical tale about a class-segregated train carrying the last human survivors on Earth**

BY CLARENCE TSUI

An adaptation of the cult French comic book series *Le Transperceneige*, Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* is an epic yet contemplative vehicle that uses its titular locomotive as an allegory for human existence as we see it in the here and now.

Boasting a stellar international cast that includes Chris Evans, Tilda Swinton and John Hurt to cement the film's art house credentials — *Snowpiercer* has given Bong a blockbuster hit in his home market, taking in roughly \$60 million at the South Korean box office.

The viewer is basically thrust into the thick of things right from the start, with tensions aboard *Snowpiercer* — a perpetually moving

bullet train carrying Earth's only remaining human inhabitants — on the verge of boiling over as a result of segregation between the elite, living in comfort in the front carriages, and the impoverished masses huddled in the rear cars. Seventeen years have passed since the world has frozen over and the oppressed masses are plotting to break out from their confinement. The raid on the front cars is led by Curtis (Evans) and the younger Edgar (Jamie Bell), with the bespectacled, one-armed elder Gilliam (Hurt) serving as the sage and conscience of the whole operation.

Bong's vivid depictions — aided by Ondrej Nekvasil's production design, Hong



Song plays a key role in the rebellion.

Kyung-pyo's cinematography and Steve M. Choe's editing — make *Snowpiercer* an intellectually and artistically superior vehicle to many of the end-of-days action thrillers out there. But while the references to real-life atrocities should certainly resonate with international audiences, the overt ways in which Bong hammers his points home actually make the film less powerful than the more layered political allegories of his previous films like *Memories of Murder* and

*The Host*.

Still, *Snowpiercer* remains a riveting ride, and Bong is now poised for the foreign breakthrough that has eluded his fellow South Korean directors Kim Jee-won (*The Last Stand*) and Park Chan-wook (*Stoker*), who encouraged Bong to adapt the property and served as a producer on the film.

*Gala Presentation*

**Cast** Chris Evans, Song Kang-ho, Tilda Swinton  
**Director** Bong Joon-ho

# The Fifth Estate

**Benedict Cumberbatch's Julian Assange is the highlight of a sometimes ordinary-feeling film** BY JOHN DEFORE

Whittling the logistical sprawl and moral swamp of WikiLeaks into the story of a falling-out between two intimate partners, Bill Condon's *The Fifth Estate* views site founder Julian Assange largely through the eyes of Daniel Domscheit-Berg, his German spokesperson. Like *The Social Network*, here we have an Internet phenomenon that has changed the world, created by a polarizing, psychologically opaque man accused of betraying those around him. But the comparison isn't flattering to *Estate*, which, though it traffics in life and death and threats to the world's institutions, isn't always as gripping as a film whose main drama was who would get rich over letting "friends" share party pictures.

The most compelling thing here

is the film's vision of Assange, by all accounts a man of enormous self-regard and slippery ethics. Benedict Cumberbatch has the character in hand from the start — his way of brushing into another's space and making it his office, of not seeing others unless they're reflecting back some of the energy he emits, of elevating



Cumberbatch, left, and Bruhl form a tense partnership.

himself by making others' concerns sound trivial.

When Assange and Berg (Daniel Bruhl) first meet at a hacker convention, the younger man is flattered to have the opportunity to spread awareness of a site he believes in. Bringing Assange to a party house in Berlin, the two sit in a quiet corner with laptops open, typing chat messages back and forth instead of speaking. Lines from the chat are projected across the actors' faces, the only really smirk-worthy device Condon uses in a film hoping to animate online activity. Later sequences, which use innumerable headlines receding into the distance to show how leaks propagate online, are simply uninspired and unable to capture WikiLeaks's startling impact visually.

*World Cinema*

**Cast** Benedict Cumberbatch, Daniel Bruhl // **Director** Bill Condon  
128 minutes

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